

DRG Learning CoP

What Works to Roll Back Democratic Backsliding?

Speakers



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The Study: Original Research on 15 Case Studies

Outcomes:	Recovery	Moderate Backsliding	Severe Backsliding
Cases:	Brazil Ecuador Malawi Moldova South Korea	Benin India Indonesia Poland Tunisia	Hungary Nicaragua Serbia Turkey Venezuela

Available on USAID Website

- Executive Summary Report
- 15 Case Study Reports
- Pilot test of textual analysis of campaign messages for democratic backsliding and resistance
- Pilot test of an Agent-based Modeling simulation of backsliding scenarios over time

Key Findings

While context matters in designing a toolkit to autocrats, sites of successful resilience with strategies are detailed below:

- Electorate:** Depolarization and strengthening democratic support through responsible media consumption, positive social contacts, involvement in pro-democracy civil society, and local political engagement.
- Civil Society:** Pushing back against anti-democratic leaders while minimizing further polarization through non-violent protest, alliance building, seeking accountability through legal channels, mass mobilization in response to anti-democratic actions, and focusing on valence issues and shared identities.
- Political Parties:** Seeking redress and accountability through "democratic enclaves," building pro-democracy platforms in partnership with civil society, forming broad electoral coalitions, avoiding aggressive actions, and engaging previously excluded voters.
- Media:** Protecting media freedoms and widespread access to information through reducing polarization, managing social media fragmentation, increasing publicly-funded media, media literacy efforts, and transparency from social media companies.
- Judiciary:** Maintaining independence through a strong judicial support network, peer-controlled appointment processes, limiting new auxiliary court systems, and grounding judicial autonomy in the constitution.
- Legislature:** Executive accountability through opposition control of legislative chambers, internal divides in the ruling party, mass public movements against the executive, and a history of institutional independence in the legislature.
- Bureaucratic Agencies:** Providing a check on autocratic ambitions through professionalism, financial and administrative autonomy, procedural creativity, high performance for public support, and possibly outsourcing policy implementation.
- Electoral System:** Systems that reduce polarization, extremism, and violence may help block or minimize backsliding. Majoritarian systems with single-round rules tend to be associated with a higher likelihood of backsliding due to increased polarization and violence.

Key Resources

Check out the Literature Review, the 15 case studies and summary report. The original research summary report and case studies cover case studies of 15 countries experiencing democratic backsliding since 2000, focusing on opportunities to restore democratic political violence.

See the full report for more information or contact: **NORC at the University of Chicago** | prostik-ai@norc.org
DRG Evidence & Learning Team | drl.drg.almallist@usaid.gov

Key Findings and Conclusions



Multiple pathways to backsliding and recovery

- Dynamic Processes: partial backsliding is unstable equilibrium and can either recover or slide to severe erosion and autocracy
 - No necessary preconditions that make inevitable backsliding or its outcomes (e.g. structural factors, social cleavages, economic crisis, corruption scandals)
 - Importance of Political Agency and Political Choice
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Time in backsliding matters

- 10-year inflection point: all recoveries to date are before 10 years
- Early awareness is key: early provides more opportunities, but weaker incentives to respond. Hard to recognize that backsliding is happening or threatening.
- Moderate backsliding is indeterminate and unstable.
- Severe backsliding has consolidated executive power to degree that impedes opposition success.

Opportunities for Autocrats:

- They exploit crises of political representation and unresponsiveness by mainstream politicians.
- They use polarizing strategies and drive polarization even where it was not deep; backsliding can further deepen polarization over who presents a threat to democracy.
 - Therefore, a challenge for the opposition is to create a democracy vs autocracy regime cleavage strategy that shifts the axis of polarization to crystalize choice for voters without “Othering”.
- They use some common strategies to create an unlevel political playing field, capture institutions, and limit choices available to citizen.

Sources of democratic vulnerability

- Unresolved deficits of representation and socioeconomic or cultural inequities by existing political actors and institutions.
- Majoritarian electoral systems with disproportionate representation
- Practices of elite collusion
- Hyper-presidentialism, with weak checks and balances
- Control of media and information

Pro-Democracy Resistance Strategies

Opposition Electoral Coalitions

- Vigorous and unified electoral challenges to autocrats
 - (Brazil, Turkey, Moldova, Poland 2023)
- Help keep democratic spaces open, even when they are not able to defeat incumbent autocrats
 - (Turkey and Hungary)



Political Party Development

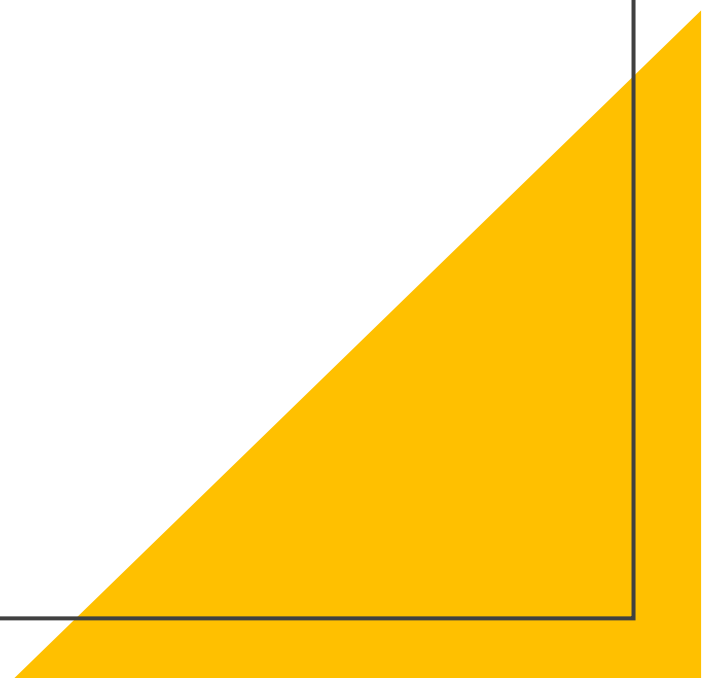
- Opposition Parties often severely weakened during backsliding episodes
 - popular alienation, mistakes/unresponsiveness, autocratic clampdowns
- Need to rebuild party organization and capacity, connections with voters
 - Identify changing voter attitudes and loyalties
 - Context of growing partisan and affective polarization, disinformation, and socio-cultural differences
 - Practices: canvassing, listening tours, focus groups to understand grievances and values of different constituents (including incumbent supporters)

Mass Protests and Social Mobilization

- Restrain autocrats, strengthen electoral resistance, block or even reverse backsliding
 - (Moldova, Malawi, South Korea)
- Not guaranteed to be successful; may elicit backlash from autocrats who increase repression of civil society and political parties
 - (Nicaragua)

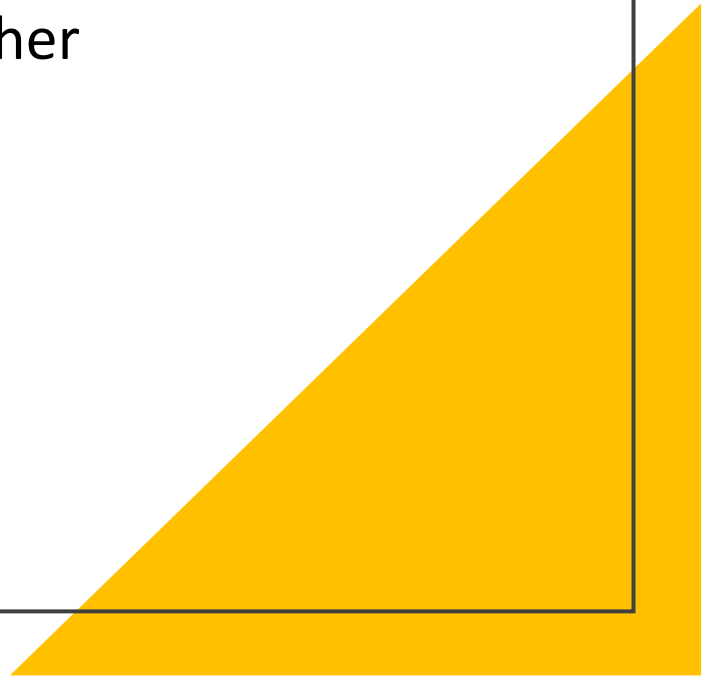
Investigative Media Reporting

- Critical for monitoring and publicizing incumbent abuses of power and keeping democratic spaces open



Activist Court Decisions

- Critical for preventing autocrats from violating constitutional norms, extending their terms in office, or engaging in other forms of backsliding
 - (Malawi, Moldova, South Korea)



Competing in Local Elections

- Allows opposition to win Mayorships in capital cities and other major regional cities, keep local democratic spaces open, and revive opposition parties and their societal linkages
 - (Turkey, Venezuela, Hungary)
 - Can prevent autocrats from completely monopolizing governing institutions

- Coups or coup attempts
 - Tend to deepen political polarization, divide opposition forces into moderate and hardliners, and weaken the democratic credentials of at least some sectors of the opposition
- Election boycotts or withdrawals from democratic arenas
 - Tend to backfire. While boycotts are intended to delegitimize incumbents, that generally does not happen. Boycotts allow incumbents to further monopolize key institutional sites and lock out opposition
- Punitive or retaliatory investigations, harassment, or trials
 - Exacerbate polarization and raise doubts about commitment to fair and inclusive democratic competition.


Less
Successful
and Counter-
productive
Strategies

International Factors

Democratic Assistance

- Recognize the role of regional powers (China, Russia) in influencing domestic politics through ideology, propaganda, and direct support
- Supporting independent Media
 - Early target of backslider, relatively low costs to support
- Supporting independent Civil Society
 - Early target, focus on local groups
 - Civil society leaders and academics provide early warning system
- Even when civil society and media roll backs are successful, publicizing reactions and organizing demonstrations results in legitimacy costs for the incumbent - important where elections are still viable
 - South Korea, Ukraine, Moldova, Bolivia

Democratic Assistance

- Supporting Judicial professionalization and independence
 - Key to blocking and slowing backsliding, especially when incumbent does not have power to change constitution and appointment rules.
 - Electoral observation and evaluations
 - Direct support for independent observation missions
 - External evaluation of elections informs and frames legitimacy
 - Political Parties strengthening
 - Supporting the building of effective political parties, likely hampered by autocratic policies, funding.
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Final Thoughts

Conditions that Constrain Backsliding and Buttress Democratic Resiliency

- Greater proportionality in electoral systems
- Multiple institutional veto points to disperse power (bicameral legislatures, independent courts, dual executives, federalism and vibrant local governments, etc.)
- Internal factionalism or lack of cohesion within autocratic coalitions, plus the challenges of political succession
- Electoral opposition to autocratic concentrations of power; it is hard for autocrats to completely shut down electoral contestation

Silver Lining, but No Silver Bullet: The Uncertainty of Backsliding

- **Key Takeaway:** It is not easy for aspiring autocrats to fully dismantle democratic checks and balances in many societies, even if they damage or compromise them
 - Are cases of recovery (South Korea, Brazil, Malawi, Moldova, Ecuador– and perhaps now Poland and Guatemala?)
 - Also intermediate or hybrid cases of restrained backsliding (Indonesia, India, Poland)

Q & A